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**ARISTOCRATIC WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC  
SPHERES IN MALAYA BEFORE 1941**

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***Abstract***

Compared to Aceh Dar al-Salam which was ruled by four female rulers during the second half of the seventeenth century, the Malay states have never witnessed similar political ascendancy of women. Court and aristocratic women, due to *adat* (indigenous customary laws) and patriarchal practices, tend to be excluded from direct participation in the political sphere. Thus women were seen as voiceless, unambitious, and subordinated to men throughout their lives. However, Malay sources like court narratives and correspondence of rulers have indicated that women were not averse to palace politics. They even defied political and religious principles to gain the upper hand in matters relating throne succession. There were even cases of palace women resorting to abort pregnancy as a form of protest against patriarchal power. Combining nobility status and ingenuity to manipulate available opportunities, palace women and women of noble birth have successfully took part in economic undertakings. History of the Malay states have seen such women dabbling in the tin, rice and cloth trade. They even managed to become the biggest investor in the slave trade in Perak in the 19th century.

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**Keywords:** Aristocratic women, *adat*, patriarchy, political spheres, trade.



## 1. Introduction

In Malaysia and the rest of Southeast Asia, historians face considerable difficulty in undertaking research on women due to a variety of factors including the lack of primary sources. Traditionally, history relies on written records with women less likely to be its authors. As these documents always referred to men the history of women was marginalised or omitted through prejudice or neglect. As a result, the development of human society is told largely through the male perspective.

## 2. Problem Statement

Scholars have differed as to the effect of religion on the status of women. Karim, (1992) shows Malay *adat* had considerably affected women's position vis-à-vis men despite Islamization. Malay *adat* and Islam provided contradictory and conflicting statement in gender relation in terms of rituals, economy and politics but does not eliminate their autonomy and economic importance. Andaya (2006), on the other hand, claims religion did not bring about any change towards society's perceptions nor women's lives. According to Andaya (2006), in stressing the behaviour of "good" women, Islam and Christianity joined with Buddhism and Confucianism in presenting forthright and persuasive models of female modesty and submissiveness. Andaya (2006) claims women in Southeast Asia were also economically marginalised in international trade although at times female entrepreneurs and wealthy court ladies emerged as key players. But in general, men were more inclined towards trading with their own kind. On the contrary, Reid (1988) had shown that since the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, women in Southeast Asia has long been identified as enjoying high status and were never questioned unlike in China, India and the Middle East. They were involved in economic activities including international commerce and they were also rulers in their own right. This pattern had not changed with the arrival of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity to Southeast Asia.

## 3. Research Questions

The main research question is to what extent the constraint of *adat* and patriarchal practices in palace life or for aristocratic women marginalised them from involvement in political discussion and decision, and prevented them from involvement in trading activities which was monopolised by the men?

## 4. Purpose of the Study

This essay examines how aristocratic women amidst the constraints of *adat* and patriarchal practices, became agents of historical change creating their own space in Malaysian history.

## 5. Research Methods

The research involves qualitative analysis method through careful scrutiny of Malay traditional texts like the *Malay Annals*, *Tuhfat al-Nafis* and *Hikayat Siak* to get the authors' perceptions towards palace and aristocratic women. Also utilised are primary sources notably records of the Che Manjalara and Johor Religious Affairs Department.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Women's Status in Society

Traditional Malay society is categorised generally into two classes, the ruling class and the subject (*rakyat*). This categorisation had considerably influenced the status of women. Until the British administration, marriages from different classes/clans were prohibited as they created messy social issues. In Johor and Pahang, the application of girls of Arab descent to the *kadi's* office to marry the men of their choice had triggered debates among religious officers in both states. In Kedah, up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, marriages between couples from the same descent were a must for royal children. In the wake of the controversy surrounding the marriage of Tunku Yahya and Tunku Mohamed Jawa with European women Kedah passed a law on 6 August 1931 that prohibit such recourse for any member of the royalty. The law was also applicable to Kedah student who were studying abroad under state sponsorship; to marry they must secure permission from the state government. Breaking this law means the royalty concerned would cease to be a royal and lost all royal privileges while the student would not be allowed to serve the state. Similarly, children of royal brides who married commoners could not inherit any royal titles that would link them to the royal household. Gullick (1988) regards this as 'social degradation' to the woman.

Interestingly, the Malay royalty freely had accepted those of Arab descent as they were considered descendants of the Prophet (pbuh). This group used the prefix '*Syed*' for male and '*Sharifah*' for female. In Malay society there was no degradation of status in this kind of marriage. In the history of the Malay sultanate, marriages with the '*Syed*' group were quite the norm. In Kedah the sultans often gave away their daughters to the descendants of '*Syed*'. Tunku Safiah, daughter of Sultan Dhiauddin Mukarram Shah II (r.1798-1804) was given away in marriage to Syed Harun Jamalullail. As they lived in Arau, the Sultan bestowed Arau to Syed Harun as an inheritance. Another ruler Sultan Abdul Hamid (r.1881-1943) had a few wives from the '*Syed*' clan. Among them were Sharifah Seha, Sharifah Fatimah and Sharifah Mariam. Their children were regarded as royalty although they used the prefix '*Syed*' and '*Sharifah*' with their names. There were also no prohibitions to marry Siamese aristocrats. In 1855, Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin III (1854-1879) married Wan Jah, daughter of the Raja Patani who was brought up by a minister in Bangkok. Sultan Abdul Hamid, too, had wives from the Siamese aristocracy. The most outstanding was Che Manjalara, the daughter of the Nonthaburi district officer. It was obvious that Kedah chose political importance and played down descent in order to maintain good relationship with Siam.

Other than political instrument to tame an enemy who intend to usurp the throne aristocratic women did not have any particular role to play in the palace. However, there were much evidence of smart aristocratic women who manipulated their positions to ensure their side gained power. Suffice to say that aristocratic women always had the opportunity not only in the political aspect but also in the economic field if they were smart enough to seize whatever opportunities that came their way. As the wife of the sultan or chief she was given access and wealth even though the husband had other wives. Their status also depended on their husbands' social hierarchy which left an impact on women who were not in the same class, particularly palace servants and slaves. The status of the sultan's slaves was much higher than those of a chief. Anyone disturbing the royal slaves would get the mandatory death penalty while anyone who kidnapped a slave would have to pay fourteen time the value of the slave (Maxwell,

1890). Palace servants and slaves including debt bondsmen had commercial values as they could increase the wealth of their masters. Gullick (1988) writes about female slaves and debt-bondsmen working throughout the day but prostituting themselves at night. Their masters pocketed part of the earnings while the balance was used to feed the entire household and other slaves. It was the slaves' commercial value that caused the murder of the Perak Resident J.W.W. Birch in 1875 after he gave shelter to women slaves who had run away from their masters.

In Pekan, Pahang Hugh Clifford witnessed an uproar when Tengku Indut kidnapped four palace dancers who were his father's favourites. His father was then out of town with another favourite concubine. The female dancers were being trained to be palace dancers. Indut's action angered his stepsister, Tengku Aminah. Clad as a warrior and suitably armed with a kris and a smaller dagger called 'pepper-crusher' Tengku Aminah marched to Tengku Indut's house at midnight. She was backed by some three hundred women who were armed with spears, daggers, old swords, kitchen knives, axes, choppers, and sticks. The women surrounded Indut's residence demanding him to surrender the four dancers but the latter ignored the demand. Aminah refused to give in but a shout from Indut, 'Awang! Bring me my sword', was all that was required to disperse them. The dancers were only surrendered after the sultan had returned to the palace (Clifford, 1897; Ahmad, 2016). This episode shows meddling with the palace household was not a trivial matter. In this case, a palace woman had challenged her stepbrother so as to protect her mother who had brought up the dancers. Clifford found this of considerable interest that he included it in his book under the title "the battle of the women." Clifford (1897) found Aminah and her "army" extraordinary in contrast with most Malay women who were modest and submissive.

## **6.2. Women Involvement in the Political Spheres**

Western scholars like Gullick (1988) view Malay aristocratic ladies as without any power or political influence. They never took part in any political discussions and never held any important positions although a few had court titles. Yet they were still a political factor – as personalities and as a media of affinal ties. This view would not stand if we refer to the role of court ladies in palace politics. Kheng (1993) in his discussion of queens and court ladies had introduced the phrase 'behind the throne' as physical space, an extremely strategic position and only held by closest royal family members like the sultan's mother, his Consort, his other wives, even ladies-in-waiting and chambermaids (*dayang-dayang*) who were allowed to serve the royal family. All of them were interested in politics and were cunning, although outwardly, they may seem as curious onlookers occasionally peeping out from behind the curtain or screen, without any role or influence. According to Kheng (1993), these women were 'capable of great guile, manipulation and ruthlessness which could produce deadly results.' Kheng (1993) defined behind the throne as a location but the influence of women in the palace have to be looked through a wider space not just the physical space, befitting the proverb behind every successful man there is a woman. This is true in the other Malay States. In the following century, the role of palace ladies went beyond 'behind the throne' including direct dealings with specific parties in missions that were political in nature.

Hashim (2003) fine-tuned Kheng's hypothesis. Using Malay traditional court narratives, Hashim (2003) found the notion that women were side-lined as inaccurate. Instead she categorized women into the silent, the consenting or the dissenting women. Through these three categories Hashim (2003)

examined how women 'unsettle their patriarchal principles which purportedly govern their lives'. For example, women who appeared in the *Sejarah Melayu* were pictured as concubines or mistresses of kings who became diplomatic pawns. Their marriage was meant to strengthen diplomatic ties or to settle internal political problems. These women were in the category of silent women. The most famous was Tun Kudu who was divorced by Sultan Muzaffar Syah to enable her to be married to Sri Nara Diraja as a way of courtly political rivalry (Brown, 1952). In this case neither Islam nor *adat* could defend Tun Kudu's position. Such cases highlight the Melaka women as weak. Tun Kudu accepted her fate as her marriage to Seri Nara Diraja ended factionalism in the Melaka court which could weaken the sultanate. Tun Kudu was voiceless in the entire affair but it was believed she gave her consent because the sultan would appoint her brother Tun Perak as bendahara, thus restoring family status and honour following the death of their father, Seri Wak Raja. Tun Kudu's silence was meant to ensure her descendants would continue to be in power in the Melaka Sultanate.

While women's silence could be a symbol of powerlessness, it could be used as a stratagem as the case of Tengku Tengah who was the daughter of Sultan Abdul Jalil of Johor. The *Hikayat Siak* and *Tuhfat al-Nafis* painted Tengku Tengah in different light. The *Hikayat Siak* supported the appointment of Raja Kechik as the Johor ruler because Raja Kechik, being the son of Sultan Mahmud (of regicide fame) was the legitimate heir. Sultan Mahmud was assassinated in 1699 by the Bendahara who subsequently ascended the throne as Sultan Abdul Jalil. In the *Hikayat Siak* Tengku Tengah was described as a woman who would do anything to redeem her honour following the broken engagement to Raja Kechik who had usurped the Johor throne from Sultan Abdul Jalil. Raja Kechik subsequently married her younger sister, Tengku Kamariah. Tengku Tengah persuaded her elder brother, Tengku Sulaiman, to negotiate with the Bugis to redeem her honour. In return she was willing to marry the Bugis Daeng Parani and be his 'slave' if he would defeat Raja Kechik and save the family honour. In revenge Tengku Tengah kidnapped Tengku Kamariah from Raja Kechik (Hashim & Said, 1992). In their efforts to oust Raja Kechik, Tengku Tengah and her brother were supported by the Bugis. This was the start of Bugis influence in the Johor Sultanate.

On the other hand, the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* described Tengku Tengah as a woman of strength who wanted to redeem the family honour no matter what it takes. Tengku Tengah agreed to marry Daeng Parani in return for Bugis support in eradicating the family shame. From behind the curtain separating her from Tengku Sulaiman and Daeng Parani, Tengku Tengah whispered to Daeng Parani to help redeem her family honour and they would be slaves to the Bugis (Haji & Raja, 1997; Andaya, 2017). Hashim (2003) summarised Tengku Tengah's case as consenting voices, i.e. women's involvement in men's discussion, giving suggestions and agreeing to whatever actions that would satisfy them.

The Malay court narratives include examples of women voices which were not in consonant with patriarchal idea of the weak women as highlighted by the case of Tun Fatimah. Tun Fatimah was the daughter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century bendahara of Melaka Seri Maharaja Tun Mutahir who was well known for his wealth. As Bendahara he failed to introduce Tun Fatimah to Sultan Mahmud whose consort (*Raja Perempuan*) had recently passed away. According to royal *adat*, in the absence of the royal consort, the daughter of the Bendahara became *Raja Perempuan*. Instead, the Bendahara married his daughter to Tun Ali, who was the son of Sri Nara Diraja. When Sultan Mahmud was invited to the wedding and saw the beautiful Tun Fatimah he became revengeful towards her father the bendahara. When the bendahara was

accused by Kitul and Raja Mendaliar of planning treason Sultan Mahmud sentenced the *Bendahara* to death along with Sri Nara Diraja, his son-in-law and followers who choose to die with them. Only Tun Hamzah, Sri Nara Diraja's son was saved due to his age. When the truth about the whole episode was known a remorseful Sultan Mahmud sentenced Raja Mendaliar to death and took the beautiful Tun Fatimah to be his consort. Tun Fatimah, extremely sad over the death of her father, husband and family members, resolved to avenge their death in a very unusual way. She stopped smiling and harmed herself through abortions which seemed to achieve its aim. Tun Fatimah finally agreed not to cause abortion after Sultan Mahmud assured her that if she gave birth to a son, he would be made king (Brown, 1952).

Tun Fatimah succeeded not only in her revenge but also to redeem her family by promoting the family status to the level of a ruler. This took place during the Portuguese attack on Melaka in 1511. Sultan Ahmad who was ruling Melaka during that time had fled to Pahang and then to Bentan, accompanied by his father, Sultan Mahmud. However, his conduct of not showing respect to his senior officers and chiefs offended Sultan Mahmud who had him murdered and retook the throne. At the same time, Sultan Mahmud designated his son Raja Muzaffar Shah as his successor. The new administration was located in Bentan. Tun Fatimah then gave birth to a boy whom Sultan Mahmud named Raja Alauddin Shah. When the prince was 40 days old, Sultan Mahmud named him successor thereby displacing Raja Muzaffar Shah (Brown, 1952). Sultan Alauddin later became the first ruler of the Johor kingdom.

In this context, the role of the Queen Mother was decisive in the succession struggle. In selecting the *Bendahara* of Melaka, Sultan Mahmud seemed to follow the suggestion of Tun Naja the Queen Mother to appoint Tun Mutahir as the new *Bendahara* (Brown, 1952). The Queen Mother was a half-sister of *Bendahara* Sri Maharaja Tun Mutahir. Tun Naja had ensured her descendants would always be key figures in the Melaka sultanate.

Elsewhere in Johor the *Laksamana's* daughter became the regent following the death of Sultan Ibrahim on 16 February 1685. Sultan Ibrahim was believed to have been poisoned by his three wives who were later sentenced to death while an infant son from one of his wives was installed as Sultan Mahmud Syah. His Consort who was the daughter of the *Laksamana* was to rule as Queen. Both the Queen and *Laksamana* were given authority to look after the boy-king although she herself had no children by Sultan Ibrahim (Andaya, 1975). Kheng (1993) saw the *Laksamana's* daughter as a willing accomplice to her father's scheme, and she became target of opposing faction led by the *Bendahara*. The *Bendahara* and the *Orang Kaya* strongly objected the practise of the young ruler sitting on the lap of the Queen Mother on the throne during public functions instead of the *Bendahara*. The saga ended when the *Laksamana* was overthrown in a coup d'etat.

In Perlis and Kedah women in the royal household were still involved in palace politics in the following centuries. In the Perlis royal household, the role of Wan Fatimah in the installation of her son Syed Hussein as Raja of Perlis was a case in point. Between 1821-42 Kedah and Perlis were under Siamese rule. Although Siam governed Kedah directly there were opposition from the Malays who wanted to restore the Kedah Sultanate. To end the political stalemate, the Siamese king Rama III decided in 1839 to install Tunku Anum as Governor of Kedah. This news was conveyed to Wan Fatimah by a Kedah dignitary Muhammad Arshad (father-in-law of Syed Hussein). Wan Fatimah then asked Muhammad Arshad to gather all Perlis chiefs to have an audience with her. She also asked him to write a

letter to the Raja of Ligor asking him to appoint Syed Hussein Jamalullail as Raja Kayang (Perlis) to succeed a son of Tunku Dhiauddin who had died in Melaka. In the letter it was mentioned that Syed Hussein was Tunku Dhiauddin's grandson. The Arau district was awarded by the Kedah ruler to Syed Harun Jamalullail (father of Syed Hussein) and his descendants. In fact, when Syed Harun died, Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin appointed Syed Hussein as successor. The effort succeeded as in 1841/42 Siam installed Syed Hussein as the first Raja of Perlis (Tang, 2002).

In Kedah the role of Wan Hajar (first wife) and Wan Jah (second wife) in promoting their sons to the throne after the death of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin III (r. 1854-1879) should not be viewed as trivial. Wan Jah's son was installed as Sultan Zainal Rashid II (r. 1880-1881) because Wan Hajar's son at the time was only 12 years old. Soon after Wan Hajar's son was installed as Sultan Abdul Hamid (r. 1881-1943). Wan Hajar, known as Mak Wan Besar was involved in running the state administration because the sultan was mentally unstable and prone to extravagant spending. When the state was experiencing financial crisis in 1905, Wan Hajar wrote to Prince Damrong who was the Siamese Home Minister, expressing her anxiety about Kedah's political and economic development (Mahani, 2015).

The above cases had shown that women were not hiding behind the throne as depicted in the court narratives. Neither were their actions circumscribed by *adat* or patriarchal practices that preclude their entry into the domain of male politics. The case of Johor, Kedah and Perlis show court ladies were directly involved in state politics.

### **6.3. Aristocratic Women as Traders and Agriculturalist**

Royal connections allowed women more opportunities to be actively involved in trade although success depends on individual skill. Che Manjalara, one of Sultan Abdul Hamid's wives, was a smart woman. She used her status to enrich herself. Che Manjalara owned a house in Bangkok which was bequeath by her father. In Alor Setar she had another house and a piece of land which was presented by the sultan and houses for rent. She was a smart business woman and had the foresight to cultivate good relationship with the British to develop Kedah.

Before 1909 Alor Setar was just a big village surrounded by jungle. At the time, Alor Setar had gravel road linking the northern part with the south. Realising its importance Che Manjalara built many roads in Alor Setar. She built a road through her properties which was later named Jalan Baharu. Today the road is still a busy one in Alor Setar. She also built shop houses in this area. She even owned a market. The shop houses and market was testimony of her business acumen in accumulating wealth (Miller, 1982). Stalls in the market were rented out and she personally collected the monthly rental (Soong, 2002). Che Manjalara had made use of the opportunities as a royal to strengthen her economic status and the status of her descendants. She was 61 years old when she died on 23 April 1941. Her wealth from various sources at the time of her death totalled \$59,649.00 (SO 120/60 Estate Yang Teramat Mulia Che Manjalara bt. Long Nara).

Che Manjalara was not the only women from noble background who was involved in business. A century earlier women could undertake petty trading in the market while the wife of the Raja Muda of Selangor traded in tin, cloth and rice. Apparently she had a good relationship with Francis Light who was based in Ujong Salang (Junk Ceylon, now Phuket). Siti Sabariah Cahaya Alam from Kedah was another lady who had dealings and was personally close with Light. Based on her involvement in trade and

having her own trading chop Siti Sabariah could possibly from the nobility. She had written a letter to Light who was then in Ujung Salang. In this letter Siti Sabariah addressed herself as 'adinda' (sister) while Light was addressed 'kekanda' (brother). In this letter Siti Sabariah mentioned she had sent her captain (*nakhoda*) by the name of Muhammad Said to trade in Ujong Salang and asked Light to take care of him (Gallop, 1994). Another lady Long Fatimah was from the Kayang (Perlis) nobility. She was involved in the trade of local products. She was not only able to compete with her male counterpart in trade but had developed trade relationship with one Captain Scott from Ujong Salang (Halimi, 1998).

The freedom to do business outside the home was also evident in Perak. Wife of aristocrats who usually depended on their husbands' wealth were equally active in accumulating wealth themselves. One example was Toh Puan Halimah who was the daughter of the Datuk Laksamana and the leading chief of Lower Perak in the 1860s and early 1870s. Later she became the principal wife of the Tengku Menteri Ngah Ibrahim who controlled the mining district of Larut. When her father and husband were stripped of their titles and subsequently exiled to the Seychelles following their involvement in the Birch murder of 1875, Toh Puan Halimah and the second wife of the Tengku Menteri refused to follow their husband but continued to display enmity towards the British government and its officers. She was smarter than the second wife and ensure all her husband's wealth were transferred to her. She was also the largest single investor in debt-bondsmen. As an investor, Toh Puan Halimah had the right to use her debt-bondsmen for whatever tasks she decided. When debt-bondage was abolished in Perak in 1883, she received compensation from the state government for the unpaid debts of the bondsmen. She was also involved in *atap* business and submitted to the state government a tender of \$120 per month to collect taxes on the export of *atap* from Larut (Gullick, 1987).

## 7. Conclusion

The above discussion had clearly shown that although life in a patriarchal system was a limiting factor, smarter and courageous aristocratic women would utilise any available opportunity to improve their lives and the lives of their descendants. *Adat* and religion were never a stumbling block to them. Women from aristocratic background had more opportunities to be involved in the struggle for the throne and the economy because of their husbands' status. Smart court ladies were able to manipulate these advantages to ensure the candidate of their choice were enthroned as the ruler, while their relationship with European traders proved aristocratic women were never voiceless, unambitious and subordinated to the men throughout their lives. They were in fact creating their own space and history.

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