

A Conqueror's Correspondence A Century Ago

Related by

UNKU PENGIRAN ANUM

(Ungku Syed Abdul Kadir of Kuala Trengganu)

SULTAN OMAR, who ruled Trengganu from 1839 to 1876, was always referred to as 'Baginda' because he won the throne of Trengganu by conquest.

He was the second son of Sultan Ahmad, but perhaps because his mother was a Patani Chinese, who took the name of Che Hajah when the Sultan married her, he was passed over in favour of his uncle and then his lispng first cousin and was obliged to live in exile in the Lingga Islands. As a Youth he had earned a reputation for initiative and courage, and he was a man of remarkable physique, it is therefore not surprising that he received widespread support as soon as he returned.

During his long reign he discontinued the sending of the golden Flowers (Bunga Emas) to Siam and centralised the administration and the collection of revenue under his direct control, and he corresponded extensively with his brother rulers and with the Government in Singapore.

His Chief Minister was for many years Ungku Syed Zain, my grandfather and some of the letters which he received were preserved by him and were handed down to my father, Ungku Syed Abdullah, and later to me. The four which are reproduced here are collected from more than fifty in my possession.

The first of these (No. 44) was written 110 years ago by Colonel

W. J. Butterworth (Governor of the Straits Settlements 1843–1855)—whose name is preserved opposite Penang Island at the Ferry Terminus—and refers to the system of Passports which had been introduced to distinguish Traders from the Pirates who were still interfering with vessels plying between Singapore, the Riau islands and the East Coast.

Baginda Omar had caused to be executed the crew of a junk who were accused of piracy though they were in possession of a Passport issued in Singapore.

The Second Letter (No. 17) is from Bendahara Wan Mutahir of Pahang to Sultan Mahmud of Lingga—who was a nephew of Baginda Omar. It refers to the status of Temenggong Abu Bakar, later Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore, and was written in 1855 (1271 A.H.).

This letter throws an interesting light on the relative position and authority of the Bendahara of Pahang, the Temenggong of Johore and the Sultan of Lingga, so long as the Lingga Sultanate survived.

Sultan Mahmud of Lingga was deposed by the Dutch in 1857 and then retired first to Pahang then to Trengganu and later to Siam where he died. There was a strong suspicion that the king of Siam wished to place ex-Sultan Mahmud on the Trengganu Throne in place of his too-independent uncle but British influence forestalled this.

In this, as in the other letters, the lengthy compliments which preface and conclude each document have been omitted from the translation.

The Third Letter (No. 51) was written in 1858 at a period when Wan Ahmad (later Sultan Ahmad of Pahang) was unsuccessfully attempting to seize control of Pahang from his brother, Bendahara Seri Maharaja Wan Mutahir, using Trengganu as his base of operations.

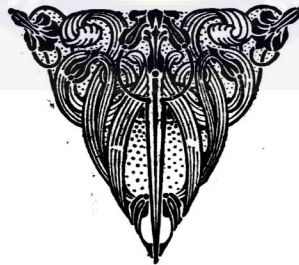
The Governor visited both Pahang and Trengganu later the same year in an attempt to restore peace, and Baginda Omar, at the Governor's request, called Wan Ahmad to Kuala Trengganu to meet him. But Wan Mutahir soon retired again to Keman and made two further attacks on the Bendahara in 1861 and 1862 the latter of which was successful.

The Fourth Letter (No. 30) written two years later is from Wan Ahmad's elder brother, Bendahara Wan

Mutahir, and refers to the quarrel between Mutahir and Wan Embong, which contributed to his eventual defeat by Wan Ahmad. Wan Embong was the eldest son of Maharaja Jelai, the territorial Chief of the Jelai area of north Pahang, and was falsely accused of treachery by Mutahir and killed in ambush and his head taken to Pekan.

The reference to Abdul Rahman is to the Bendahara's second son Wan Abdul Rahman, whose excesses and injustice also encouraged malcontents to transfer their loyalty to Wan Ahmad.

In these and many other letters a vivid glimpse of those troubled times can be obtained, but while civil war and external threats of interference disturbed the neighbouring states, the Conqueror watched his industrious countymen enter a period of prosperity and justice for which he was personally responsible, and which slowly disintegrated when he died.



FIRST LETTER (No. 43)

The Light of the Sun and the Moon

This is a sincere letter from us the Honourable Colonel Butterworth, Governor of the three territories of Penang, Singapore and Malacca to our friend Sultan Omar, son of the Late Sultan Ahmad, Ruler of Trengganu. Amen!

Now we send you this letter with reference to your letters, written on the 16th. of June and the 13th. of July last. Now we have understood from these letters that because of the robberies committed by the pirates sailing in junks on the East Coast. So you ordered a sailing boat to go out to guard the merchants and your sailing boat met and seized what they thought to be a pirate junk. From that junk 12 people had descended to take water in Dungun and there they were arrested. And moreover the junk when it was brought in, has sunk. The 12 people above mentioned were brought before Your Highness. Then you were informed that these people had travelled with an English pass issued at Singapore and therefore they were released on the guarantee of a Chinese who knew them in Trengganu, he agreed to be responsible for their attendance when required while inquiries were made from Singapore. In the meanwhile there came people from Lingga to Trengganu who said that they were wounded and (their houses) burnt by the pirates of a junk and asserted that the 12 men who were under guarantee were the people who wounded them and burnt (their houses), there was one Chinese among them of whom they were sure, because of a mark on his arm, apparently on the strength of this mark all those people were executed as pirates.

Further Your Highness is aware of the issue of these passports with the object of protecting the travellers on the open seas lest they might be suspected of being pirates and to make clear that they are merchants so that they should not be molested in any country where they go to trade. Moreover these passports are indeed respected by all people who know our customs.

As to the fact that these passports are sometimes obtained from false sources, we cannot deny that, and it seems that you believed such a thing had happened also in the case of this junk. But you should have reported the affair to the Resident Councillor in Singapore. He could have found out about that junk with an English Passport immediately. If Your Highness had waited for the result of the enquiries in Singapore, then the affair probably could have been settled to the satisfaction of all parties. Now we hope that you will please be informed that we have sent the Head of the Government of Singapore who serves directly under us, the Hon'ble Thomas Charles, Resident Councillor of Singapore, in order that he could meet Your Highness and question the plaintiffs and the witnesses in the affair of the junk whose passengers have been arrested and executed. We are confident that when the junk was seized it has been apparent to Your Highness that it was manned by pirates, and who knows, it might possibly be so, but Chinaman from Hainan (and that was the race of the shipmates of that junk) have never before been known to be pirates, and we feel inclined to believe that the struggle

between them and your patrol boat arose from the thought of the men from the junk that they were being surrounded by pirates; but in this matter you, our friend can show to the Hon'ble Thomas Charles, Resident Councillor, the information that you have used when deciding to punish those people and let that gentleman himself investigate that affair in order to be certain and to establish your name which till now is famed among the Malay race, and further so that the good relationship which has been

existed for so long between Your Highness and the British Governor may be assured permanently.

Signed

H. J. BUTTERWORTH,
Governor of
Prince of Wales Island,
Singapore and Malacca.

This letter has been written on 6th September, 1851, in Singapore.



SECOND LETTER (No. 17)

O Merciful Pardoner

Your Highness... with all the praises... from the Bendahara to His Highness the Sultan of Lingga.

It is about the letters which Your Highness has given to my son Tun Dagang.... I have understood the contents... inquiring the position of my son, Temenggong Seri Maharaja who is now in Singapore, that is whose Temenggong he really is?

As far as I am concerned, when I made him Temenggong it is clear that he is Your Highness' Temenggong. If he did not serve you, even my own flesh and blood, let alone a nephew, I would disown him, in this world or the next.

Secondly, Your Highness enquires of me about the plan to enthrone Raja

Ali in Singapore; far from being involved in this, I have not even heard of it.

Thirdly, Your Highness enquires of me about the division of territory between the English and the Dutch, I admit ignorance in this matter as I am not directly involved. What I know is that, the people before our time have made it such that whoever is Ruler, to him belongs the empire of Johore and the nine islands and no one is entitled to them except with the Ruler's consent.

Pardon your Highness, it is not at all my intention to work against you; you alone are my master.

Written 4 Haji—Wednesday, 11 a.m.
1271 A.H.



THIRD LETTER (No. 51)

Important

May God convey this sincere letter from us Mr. Henry Somerset Mackenzie to our friend Sultan Omar, son of the late Ahmad who reigns over the Kingdom of Negri Trengganu,

We have already received your letter informing us about the misfortunes of Che Wan Ahmad. So we let you know that you did no wrong in giving protection to the people from Pahang who sought shelter in your land and a number of people, who came to Singapore have also been cared for. The Temenggong of Johor has already informed Mr. Cornar that you gave help to Che Wan Ahmad but Cornar here will not believe it and he would not even say that you could do such a thing without telling (us) beforehand. Thus Mr. Cornar would not listen to this report and Mr. Cornar will come to Trengganu himself at the end of this month. Moreover as You are a King, not under the orders of whosoever, you have power for war or for peace

without needing the approval of the British Government but in consequence of the friendly association that we have enjoyed for so long, it would be proper to give information to Cornar in the interests of prolonged friendship.

One thing more : in November last year we sent a letter and now in (this) April again, both letters of the same contents are saying that the Temenggong here may not enter in any discussion with other countries without approval from the Governor here. Now that we did not yet get a reply from you till today on these letters we bring that to your attention.

Official Seal,

Signed

H. SOMERSET MACKENZIE.

Written on the 19th of April A. D.
1858—15th Ramadan 1274.



FOURTH LETTER (No. 30)

O Merciful Pardoner

Praises to God and His Prophet from Dato' Bendahara Seri Maharaja who is at present in Pahang to . . . Tengku Endut who is residing in Trengganu About Abdul Rahman I was not in time to see him, he had gone upstream the day I arrived in Pahang

About Wan Embong causing trouble, I am at my wits end to discover the reason. Tok Raja, Wan Embong and his family said that they owed allegiance to none except His Highness the Sultan: that is what I heard Tok Raja said. But nevertheless, the people amongst whom he caused trouble are the subjects of His Highness, the Sultan.

According to Wan Embong, he caused trouble for 3 reasons: firstly, because of the royal command; secondly, because his father, Tok Raja, was killed; and thirdly, the hamba raja (slaves) given to him were taken back. Now as to his father being killed, it is not known who were responsible and as regards to the hamba raja (slaves) it is also not known who deprived him of them.

According to Wan Embong if he were to attack he would go through to Pekan. And that would be the reason for the people down stream at the time to move upstream to help. If for whatever reason the people downstream did not help, they would be attacked by him (Wan Embong), so all the penghulus went to join Abdul Rahman. Because I was not there, Abdul Rahman went upstream. I hope you will pardon me. In the name of God, I am not telling you lies.

All the anak² raja and the penghulu had no evil intention against Wan Embong but they could not tolerate Wan Embong's excesses therefore they

volunteered to oppose him. Before the trouble started, they were all afraid of me because I was very close (like a brother) to Tok Raja and his family. But today, by the will of God, without any rhyme or reason, Tengku Embong departed upstream. Then came a letter from Wan Embong to me saying that he and his family would not have anything to do with me any more.

I could not say anything except to thank Allah and His Prophet that he has not done me any harm. As for me, there is no change in my feelings for it has never been my intention to harm Tok Raja and his family or any other person, for that matter. Believe me!

However, please give your pardon in this matter to Abdul Rahman as he has already departed upstream and would certainly be involved in a fight to avenge injured pride for Wan Embong is a brave man, just like Tun Abdul Rahman himself.

If Wan Embong would not retreat before Abdul Rahman, to my mind, it would be difficult to stop Abdul Rahman. Because these people are strongly opposed to Wan Embong. However, I shall try my best about this.

Not part of the main text. { I should be grateful if you could buy for me a boat of a capacity between 4,000 and 5,000 (?) at a price you would think fit

Official Seal,

Wakil Sultan Yang Sah,
DATO BENDAHARA SERI
MAHARAJA bin BENDAHA-
RA SERI MAHARAJA.

Bertarikh 1276 A.H.

27 day of Jamadil-akhir, 1276.

