

Baginda OMAR

"THE CONQUEROR"

by

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Sultan Ahmad Shah died in 1826. He was known as Almarhum Parit, on account of the Trench which he had made round his fort. The tradition of longevity among Trengganu rulers was then broken and four Sultans followed one another in the space of twelve years. Sultan Ahmad had three official wives and left three sons and two daughters. The eldest, Tengku Daud, was the son of the first wife; the second wife had no sons but a daughter, Tengku Kelsom, also known as Tengku Teh, who married Tengku Besar Mohamed of Lingga. The third wife bore Sultan Ahmad two sons, the eldest Tengku Omar, the second Tengku Mahmud, and a daughter, Tengku Chik. This third wife was a Chinese girl, whose father came to Trengganu from the Kelantan-Patani area. News of the Chinese and of the beauty of his three daughters reached Sultan Ahmad and he summoned them to his capital where they were converted to Islam. The second daughter, who was the most beautiful, was renamed Che Hajar and, after marriage to the Sultan, was given the title of Enche Puan Besar.

It is related that when Tengku Omar was still a boy, an astrologer predicted that he would rule Trengganu, and pointed to a mole which had grown on his chest. Tengku Daud who was a few years older, resented this prophecy and bit off the mole a few days later. Sultan Ahmad was buried in the graveyard which is known as Makam Sheikh Ibrahim, not far from the present Government Offices, and Che' Hajar, the Enche Puan Besar, his Chinese wife was buried near by in the same walled enclosure. Tengku Abdul Rahman, a full brother of Sultan Ahmad was the first to succeed, but he died in 1831. Tengku Daud who followed was the eldest son of Sultan Ahmad, but he only reigned for forty days. There

were then two rival claimants to the throne: Tengku Omar, Sultan Ahmad's second son, who had been appointed Yam Tuan Muda as soon as Sultan Daud succeeded to the throne, and Tengku Mansur, the only surviving brother of Sultan Ahmad, who was simultaneously given the title of Bendahara Paduka Raja. At first the Trengganu chiefs attempted a compromise and Tengku Mansur was invited to assume the title of Yang di-pertuan Tua, with Tengku Omar as Yang di-pertuan Besar, but even in a state as unaccustomed to civil war as Trengganu, two rulers could not live side by side in one place. Tengku Mansur appointed as his chief officials his maternal uncles, Che' Ku Omar and Che' Ku Ahmad, while Tengku Omar gave the title of Mentri to his father-in-law, Tengku Ismail. Both sides kept a large body of armed retainers and lived in fortified positions. Tengku Mansur at Balek Bukit and Tengku Omar near Bukit Puteri.

Tengku Mansur sent messengers secretly to Tengku Ismail offering him the post of Mentri and a large sum of money, if he would persuade Tengku Omar to withdraw. The offer was accepted and Tengku Ismail prevailed upon his son-in-law to disperse his followers, with an assurance that Tengku Mansur wished to make peace. As soon as Tengku Omar's fighting men had gone back to their homes, Tengku Mansur sent men to surround his fort and drove him out. Taking his young sister, Tengku Chik, with him, Tengku Omar retired first to Stiu then to Besut and eventually to Lingga. Tengku Mansur was then installed as Sultan Mansur II.

Sultan Mansur II died in 1836 and was succeeded by his young son, a youth of fifteen, who was given the title of Sultan Muhammad Shah. Munshi Abdullah

who visited Kuala Trengganu in 1836 describes him as irresponsible and unpopular, and Clifford states that the prince was known as Yam Tuan Teilor, a title indicating that he was afflicted by an impediment in his speech. The once prosperous kingdom had fallen on evil days, and Tengku Omar, who was still in Lingga, saw his opportunity and set out for Trengganu with his brother Tengku Mahmud. Calling at Kemaman to collect reinforcements, he arrived off Kuala Trengganu early one morning. In a council of war he decided to make his landing at noon when he calculated that most of the men would be at sea, fishing, and the remainder would be sheltering from the heat. Leaving most of his men on board, he landed with only forty followers - Clifford gives the number as 25 fighting men - among whom Wan Omar, Wan Abdul Rahman and Wan Osman were his chief lieutenants. They took possession of Kota Tengku Selmah, also known as *Kota dalam bata* (the Brick Fort) without striking a blow and quickly rallied supporters. Sultan Mohamed would have withdrawn but Che' Ku Omar and Che' Ku Ahmad, his father's uncles, were determined to resist. After a few days in which he assembled more allies, Tengku Omar attacked Bukit Puteri, where Sultan Mohamed was established and succeeded in driving him and his granduncles out at the third attempt. The young Sultan and his followers fled first to Dungun, then to Besut, where Che' Ku Omar was killed by Wan Abdul Rahman, and then to Kelantan.

Peace was restored to both Trengganu and Kelantan in 1839 and both States accepted rulers who were to remain in power for the next thirty seven years. The new Sultan, who adopted the prefix Baginda (meaning conqueror) was a remarkable man. He was tall, strongly built, with wavy hair, a pale skin, a high bridged nose and very penetrating eyes. He wore a head cloth tied in the shape of a low crown, a fashion which no one else might imitate, leaving the top of his head uncovered. For many years he made a practice of using a six-foot iron cannon as a walking stick: this cannon stood at the steps of his palace and when he left the building he would lift it up and

walk with it as far as the outer gate, where he leant it against the gate post and climbed into the litter in which he usually travelled. Even before he became Sultan he was popular with the general public and was noted for his sense of humour. Some of his youthful doings are remembered to this day. On one occasion during the lifetime of Sultan Ahmad, Tengku Omar and his circle of palace youths were sitting disconsolately, wondering where to raise funds, when they heard the sound of gongs being beaten on the river. Tengku Omar went with his followers to the river bank and there saw a procession of boats filled with Chinese and learnt that they had brought an image from Pulau Babi, which was noted for healing sick people, at the request of the Chinese traders at the capital. Tengku Omar called the Capitan (Chinese headman) and told him that the spirit of the image had told him that it had spent too long in the cold mists up-river and wished to bathe in the warm waters of the river mouth. Without waiting for a reply Tengku Omar ordered his young men to take the image and tie it to a mooring post in the river. He then retired to his house and gave orders that he was not to be disturbed. The Capitan went to the Palace and asked the Sultan to intervene, but he declined to do so. He then went to Tengku Omar's house but was told that the prince was sleeping. He might, they added, be woken if it was made worth their while. After a short period of bargaining five hundred dollars changed hands and a few minutes later Tengku Omar emerged, apparently freshly aroused from sleep. He told the Captain that he had had another dream in which the spirit of the idol had said that it was now satisfied with the warmth of its bath and was ready to proceed, and he gave orders to his men to untie the idol and restore it to its boat.

The peaceful artisans of Kuala Trengganu and the fishermen of the coast villages, who had little inclination for fighting, recognised in Baginda Omar a man of far stronger nature than his young nephew, and he proved himself to be a ruler of exceptional energy and ability. Only one further attempt was made to dispute his authority. This was made by

Tengku Hitam, also known as Tengku Wok, son of Tengku Besar Padang. This Riau raja had come to Trengganu during the reign of Sultan Zainal Abidin II, after the latter's son, Tengku Ahmad, had married a Riau princess. When Tengku Ahmad became Sultan he bestowed the Dungun river territory and revenues upon Tengku Wok Hitam as a mark of friendship and as evidence of the close ties which joined Riau & Trengganu. During the dispute over the succession in 1831, Tengku Wok Hitam supported Tengku Mansur against Tengku Omar, and he now made a final effort to reinstate Tengku Mansur's son, who had taken refuge with him at Dungun.

A month after the Baginda had seized the throne he set out with between two and three hundred men and landed at Chenering at night. His arrival was noticed by a villager named Chik, who ran to warn the Sultan. Baginda Omar had only 17 persons with him in his fort (the Brick Fort), and some of them were women, but he gave three spears to each and arranged them at intervals and gave orders for them to make as much noise as possible and to clash their spears together. Tengku Hitam's force arrived at 2 a.m. but failed to make an entry: their gun powder had been saturated in the surf when they landed and the rebel leader sent men to the magazine on Bukit Puteri to replenish their stocks. Once again fortune favoured the conqueror: a watchman on Bukit Puteri saw suspicious movements below him and emptied a cauldron of water into the magazine, and when Tengku Hitam's men arrived they found all the gunpowder unserviceable. When the dawn broke the Sultan's small garrison opened fire on the rebels while Tengku Idris gathered reinforcements, and, attacking them from the rear, soon put them to flight.

During the first few years of his reign the Baginda lived in a fort erected by him on the summit of Bukit Puteri. Subsequently he built himself a palace on the site of that occupied by his predecessors, known as the Istana Hijau, which was, however, destroyed by fire in 1882.

He improved the appearance of his capital by erecting a handsome stone

mosque, which is named Masjid Abidin, after Sultan Zainal Abidin II who laid its foundations. He also built stone causeways in the town which can still be seen, and he made it a practice to sit daily in his Balai to dispense justice and to give free access to any of his subjects who wished to approach him. Although he could neither read nor write, his interest in trade and learning led him to encourage students, skilled artisans and craftsmen from other countries to settle in Trengganu and to teach his people. He gave orders for men to prospect for tin in Kemaman and for gold in the Ulu Nerus, and he travelled extensively in every part of his kingdom.

Baginda Omar had seen enough of Riau politics during his temporary eclipse to make him appreciate the wisdom of the traditional Trengganu policy of isolation, and he devoted his time and energy to the revival of trade and ordered government. He maintained remote but friendly contacts with Riau on one side and with the powerful court of Siam on the other, without submitting to any form of control by either. He discontinued the practice of sending *Bunga Mas* (golden flowers) to Bangkok.

In March 1861, Baginda Omar visited Singapore and called on the Governor, Sir Ord Cavenagh. He requested British intervention to protect his country from the Siamese, and reiterated the statement that Trengganu was entirely independent.

A notable feature of Baginda Omar's reign was his deliberate centralisation of administration and authority. At the time of his accession the time honoured feudal system, common to all Malay States, was in operation. The country was divided into a number of territorial divisions, each of which was held in fief from the Sultan by a Dato. Each of these areas was subdivided and controlled by a Dato Muda, who held his position in fief from the major chief, and each village in these subdivisions was controlled by a Ketua or Headman, appointed by the minor chief or Dato Muda. The principal duties of the Major and Minor Chiefs and the Headmen were to supply levies of able bodied fighting men when required

by the Sultan, and to collect taxes and to exact free labour from the peasants.

Baginda Omar declined to appoint successors when territorial chiefs died and instead appointed Penghulus in charge of one or more villages who were directly responsible to him. As an example, separate Penghulus were placed in charge of the Trengganu Valley, the Upper Kerbat, the Chergul river and the lower part of the Ulu Trengganu river, although formerly all this country was under the Orang Kaya Belimbing, on whose death the post was left vacant. In more thickly populated areas each village was managed by a Penghulu. The Baginda moved so freely among his subjects that during the latter part of his reign he was affectionately referred to by the peasants as *Toh Nyang*, and on Friday mornings, when he was in Kuala Trengganu, he frequently made tours of inspection, carrying with him a sackful of coins which he distributed to the poor.

The Baginda had married many wives but remained without heirs and Tengku Ahmad, son of Tengku Mahmud his full brother, and of Tengku Dalam, the daughter of Sultan Muhammad of Lingga was then made heir apparent. In 1874 the Baginda, who was then an old man, appointed Tengku Ahmad, to rule on his behalf and took little part in the affairs of state until his death two years later. He received the Governor, Sir William Jervois, at Kuala Trengganu in the middle of 1875 and was described by the latter as "an old man of 69, much paralysed". The Governor was on a tour of the East coast which included visits to Singora and Patani.

In 1876 Baginda Omar died, having ruled his country with firmness and wisdom for thirty-seven years, and was buried with great ceremony in the Abidin Mosque, his coffin being accompanied by four white umbrellas, and carried to the sound of four salvoes fired by sixteen guns.

