TENGKU MOHAMED ARIFIN
ENVOY EXTRAORDINARY

by

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Tengku Mohamed Arifin will always have a firm place both in Indonesian history, as one of the instigators of the Dutch-Atjeh war of 1873-1912, and in Malaysian history, as one of the first accredited Malayan envoys to Europe. A biography of him would certainly help to explain the causes of these two notable events. It would also reveal much about the nature of Anglo-Malay relations in the late nineteenth century, and the difficulties of those who attempted to bridge the two worlds. The notes which follow are not a biography, but I hope they may serve to arouse interest in one of the colourful Malay figures on the nineteenth century stage.

Of Minangkabau descent, Arifin was born in the Benkulen Residency of Sumatra about 1843, the grandson of the last Sultan of Anak Sungei (Moko-Moko). His parents received a pension from the Netherlands Government to compensate for their lost power, after the 1824 transfer from Britain, but it seems that this was not to be continued to Arifin’s generation. In any case he mentioned this later as a grievance which had driven him from the Dutch and Benkulen to Malaya in the 1860’s.1

Arifin was in Atjeh for about 10 months in 1865 using his high birth and wits to procure himself an influential wife and no doubt a place in Atjehnese society. He married there a girl from the Atjehnese court. But she died very soon thereafter, and Arifin evidently decided to try his fortune on the other side of the Straits of Malacca.

He next appears in the service of Baginda Omar, Sultan of Trengganu (1839-76), a stern ruler anxious to maintain the maximum of independence for

his small state by cultivating a polite detachment from both Siam to the north and British Singapore to the south. In the Malay political contest then centring on Pahang, he sympathised with the side of the Sultan of Johor rather than the Temenggong, without however taking a very active part in the contest. This policy had not spared him the humiliation of a bombardment of Kuala Terengganu by British gunboats in November, 1862, as a result of Governor Cavenagh’s fears that Siamese influence was being extended to Pahang through Terengganu. Though he undoubtedly was legitimately grieved about this, Baginder Omar continued to cultivate cordial relations with the British.

It was for such diplomacy that he found Arifin useful. All accounts agree that Arifin was a man of exceptional ability. Writing in 1873, the Dutch Resident of Riau described him as “a young man of excellent manners, very intelligent, and speaks and writes fluent English.” Sir Harry Ord, Cavenagh’s successor as Governor of the Straits Settlements, was less sympathetic. He grudgingly admitted:

Being a clever, pushing young man he has been usually selected by the Sultan to bring messages and complimentary letters to Singapore with presents of fruits and specimens of the Sultan’s skill as a carver, of which he is very proud.

Arifin appears to have strengthened his position further by marrying a relation of the Sultan. But no more than in Atjeh did he succeed in being accepted as a member of the ruling establishment in any full sense. He remained a marginal man, useful to both Malay and Englishman because of his ability to talk to the other.

The circumstances leading Baginda Omar to despatch Arifin as an envoy to Britain have never been fully explained. There is no doubt that the major inducement was the successful visit of Temenggong Abu Bakar of Johor to Britain in 1866. In the contest over Pahang Abu Bakar’s interests had generally been opposed to Baginda Omar’s, and Omar saw how much the Temenggong gained from his close and cordial association with the British. His visit to Britain had seemed to confirm this association, by giving him the new title of Maharaja of Johor, and thereby further bypassing the claims to that state by Sultan Ali. Among more specific grievances, there remained the old sore of the 1862 bombardment, and the more recent one whereby the rulers of Johor and Pahang had partitioned the islands off their eastern coasts without bringing Terengganu into the discussions.

Underlying these causes was the growing tension between Baginda Omar and Sir Harry Ord, after the latter became Governor in 1857. Ord found early

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in 1868 that some of his problems with Kedah and Kelantan could be solved by recognising Siamese sovereignty there and exerting pressure through the Siamese on the Sultans. This policy was consolidated in cordial discussions he had with Siamese commissioners in Singapore in March 1868, and with King Mongkut himself at Wha-ewan (near Patani) in August. The dangers of this policy for the traditional autonomy and dignity of Trengganu were obvious to Baginda Omar, especially when Ord accorded a salute of fewer guns to him (as a vassal of Siam), than to the 'Maharaja' of Johor, who in Omar’s eyes was of less than royal rank. Ord had visited Trengganu in August 1868, and tried to discourage Baginda Omar’s idea of travelling to England or sending an envoy, which he “felt it to be very unlikely the Siamese Government would sanction.”

Ord’s pro-Siamese attitude was probably in part responsible for his impatience with Arifin as Trengganu spokesman. On one of Arifin’s last visits to Singapore in this capacity Ord told him to return to Trengganu as he had stayed too long in Singapore at Straits Government expense. To get rid of him, Ord said, he had also to pay a debt Arifin had incurred. A few months later, Ord reported:

He came back again on some pretext or other, and feeling satisfied that he was making a tool of the Sultan, and using his name for his own purposes I refused to see him or hold any communication with him, and told him he must return to his own country at once. He however, followed me up to Penang, and was with difficulty got rid of.

Thus the Sultan evidently decided to bypass Ord altogether and appeal to Queen Victoria over his head. He sent Arifin off quietly, presumably early in 1869 with two letters, specimens of his wood-carving, sarongs, and spears as presents, and a substantial sum for Arifin’s personal expenditure. Both letters began with profuse thanks for an exhibition medal and an inkstand Omar had received from the Queen in 1864. The letter to Queen Victoria, translated into odd English perhaps by Arifin himself, then outlined his grievance over the 1862 bombardment, which he estimated caused him £800,000 worth of damage. The second letter to the Prince of Wales simply asked help to obtain for Arifin an interview with Queen Victoria.

Arifin appears to have acquitted himself adequately in London, where he arrived by October 1869. He was received by both the Prince of Wales and

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5. This grievance was mentioned verbally to the Colonial Office by Arifin. Note by Sir F. Rogers 18 Nov. 1869, C.O. 273/34.
7. Ibid.
8. Though curiously the letter to the Prince of Wales was dated 17 Rabi‘al awal 1284 H (19 July, 1867).
9. Ord thought the amount was £1200, to Granville 1 Jan. 1870, C.O. 273/36.
the Foreign Secretary, Lord Clarendon, and received friendly replies from them for the Sultan. He laid Omar's grievances before both the Colonial and Foreign offices. That he failed to see the Queen or obtain any results comparable to those of Abu Bakar was largely due to the fact that he had no credentials of any kind from Ord. Nevertheless he was on his way home again by the time Whitehall received Ord's hostile reports about him and began to wonder whether it had been too cordial with the Trengganu envoy.

Arifin's main failing, as always, seems to have been financial. He used up all his funds living in style in Barrett's Hotel, and when the British refused Omar's request to send him back, he tried in vain to borrow £200 from the Prince of Wales for the return journey. According to Ord he was able to return to the Straits at the end of the year only by selling some jewellery.

Whether for this reason or because the mission did nothing to alter Ord's pro-Siamese stance, Arifin was no longer welcome in Trengganu on his return. He appears to have remained in Singapore, always in debt, though claiming that this was because of the large amount owed him by the Sultan of Trengganu. He made a living as far as possible as an advisor for Malays in difficulties with the British regime, and attached himself to the westernised circle of the Maharaja of Johor. He also became increasingly indebted to Mr. W.H. Read, manager of A.L. Johnston & Co., and Dutch Consul-General in Singapore. He had known Read already when in the service of Trengganu, no doubt because Read was deeply involved in the cause of Wan Ahmed in Pahang and on good terms with King Mongkut of Siam. Read appears to have won the deep gratitude of Arifin by helping him out of his financial difficulties. In return, he found Arifin extremely useful in his endeavour to keep a finger in every political pie in the region.

One such issue seems to have been the American interest in Brunei, which had continued to intrigue Singapore and Hong Kong ever since a U.S. Consul had been briefly appointed there in 1865. Read's interests in Borneo were extensive, as a friend and agent of James Brooke, and later an associate in Alfred Dent's Sabah enterprise. Arifin first visited the American Consul in Singapore, Major Studer, in "the summer of 1872", posing as a spokesman for Brunei opinion hoping that America would protect the shrinking Sultanate. “Finding

11. F.O. to C.O. 6 and 16 Nov. 1869 with enclosures, C.O. 273/34.
him remarkably intelligent"; Studer saw him frequently thereafter, enquiring about the attitudes of surrounding countries, and naively enjoying Arifin's pro-American comments.17

The following September the Atjehnese Shahbandar Panglima Tibang arrived in Singapore on a mission to appeal to Britain against the threatening intentions of Holland. Whether or not at Read's instructions, as he claimed, Arifin looked Tibang up, and established that Ord had rejected the appeal for help. Arifin and Tibang then discussed the likelihood of American help being available against the Dutch. Tibang apparently agreed that Arifin should raise the question with Studer, who replied that he would be happy to pass on to Washington any proposal drawn up by the Atjehnese side.18

Panglima Tibang returned to Atjeh with this news, while Arifin continued to see Studer regularly to discuss the Atjeh question.

About January 20th Studer gave Arifin an introduction as "a friend of the U.S. Government" to meet Admiral Jenkins, the American Naval Commander in the Far East. Both with Arifin and with Studer Jenkins discussed a future visit to Atjeh by his flagship.

The Atjehnese Shahbandar turned up again in Singapore a few days later, on January 25th, 1873. He had been sent to Riau to persuade the Dutch Resident there to delay a projected high-level Dutch mission to Atjeh for six months, giving the Atjehnese time to look for powerful allies elsewhere in case it came to war with the Dutch. He had succeeded in this by telling the Resident that the Sultan needed time to strengthen his internal position. The Resident seemed impressed with Tibang's view of events. He had sent him back to Atjeh in a Dutch warship, calling at Singapore on the way ostensibly to enable Tibang to purchase a steamer. But the Shahbandar's more important task in Singapore was to sound out the consuls of the major Western powers, especially America, about the chances of help against the growing Dutch pressure.

Consequently Tibang wasted no time in contacting Arifin again, and the two men went together to see Studer on two occasions in the last week of January. Tibang explained to Studer that the Sultan was interested in a treaty with America, Italy, France or Spain, and had empowered him to negotiate one with the consuls of these countries. Studer replied that since he as a consul had no power to negotiate a treaty, there should be a written proposal from the Atjehnese Government which he would undertake to forward to Washington. When

18. Arifin's explanation to the Dutch was that Tibang visited Studer first on his own initiative, and that Arifin only afterwards met Studer in order to check on what Tibang had said. I have preferred to believe Studer's statement that he never saw Tibang until January 1873, because there was no reason for Studer to deny this, whereas Arifin had every reason to try to hide from the Dutch that he had encouraged Atjeh to look for support to America.
Tibang pressed him further about the terms of such a treaty. Studer (according to his own account to Washington) suggested verbally that it should include extra-territoriality, measures to be taken against piracy, and perhaps a protective tariff in favour of American cloth imports.

A day after the second meeting Arifin returned to Studer's office in the Hotel de l'Europe without Tibang. According to Studer, Arifin simply sought clarification about the question of extra-territoriality, and nothing was at any point set down in writing. Arifin, on the other hand, claimed that Studer had written in English a draft Atjeh-U.S.A. treaty embodying similar points to those mentioned in Studer's own despatch; a draft letter to be written to Studer by the Sultan expressing his admiration for America and desire for a treaty; and a letter to Tibang urging him to return quickly to Singapore with the appropriate sealed documents, because the Dutch were likely to attack Atjeh very soon. Arifin purportedly took the last-mentioned letter to Tibang, after making a copy for himself, and translated the first two into Malay in Studer's office, Studer keeping the originals. Since Arifin was not able to show the Dutch any original Consular documents, it will never be known whether Studer really wrote down the terms of a potential treaty or merely suggested them verbally to an eager Arifin. It makes little difference. Tibang left for Atjeh on the Dutch warship content to have both delayed the Dutch mission and laid the groundwork for an American alliance.19

W.H. Read had left Singapore for Siam in November, 1872, and did not return until February 13th. Arifin claimed he had told Read in November about Tibang's interest in an American alliance, though Read certainly conveyed none of this to Batavia. Thereafter Arifin kept the matter to himself, until January 30th, when he wrote to Read in Bangkok reporting Tibang's visit, suggesting that Read inform the Dutch while sending him (Arifin) to Atjeh to check the facts. Read received this letter only after his return to Singapore, when Arifin quickly came and explained the whole affair to him.

Arifin's double game with the representatives of both Atjeh and Holland had catastrophic results. Read telegraphed the report of Tibang's secret diplomatic overtures at once to Batavia. There it proved all that was needed to spark the powder-keg of Dutch resentment against the Sultanate of Atjeh, which had for so long successfully resisted Dutch attempts to gain influence there. The Governor-General and his Council began immediately to talk about the "treachery" of the Atjehnese, who intrigued with America while giving soft words to the Dutch, and made frenzied preparation for war. War was declared on March 26th, with Tibang's "treachery" as the pretext. It proved one of

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19. The above description is taken from Studer to Fish 18 March 1873, U.S. Consular Despatches, Singapore; and Arifin's interrogation by Major Gen. Verspuijk in Batavia 27 July 1873, copy in G.G. to Kol. 2 August 1873, A.R.A. Kol Kab. Q38, Dossier 6040. Studer gave a roughly similar account to Colonial Secretary Birch, which is found in Ord to Kimberley 24 March 1873, C.O. 273/65.
the most disastrous wars South East Asia has known in modern times, taking about 14,000 lives on the Dutch side and at least 100,000 on the Atjehnese over a period of 40 years.

It is understandable that Arifin has borne much of the blame for these events. The Atjehnese appeared unaware of his role, making Tibang the sole scapegoat who had ‘sold’ Atjeh to the Dutch. The Dutch, at first highly grateful to Arifin as a loyal spy for their cause, gradually came to see him as a “triple traitor”, who had led the Atjehnese, Dutch and Americans all on a dance. Sir Harry Ord, similarly, was ready to ascribe the whole messy affair to “this rascally intriguer” while Studer was of course utterly disgusted to discover Arifin in the pay of Read.

Some of the strong language used of him by the Dutch was due to their mistake in having at first thought of him as a loyal Dutch subject and employee. This he clearly never was. He had no love for the Dutch, and his loyalty to Read (if that is the word for it) was a purely personal one, based on economic dependence as well as the forceful character of the Dutch Consul.

Significantly Read himself was the only one of the interested parties who never condemned Arifin’s double-dealing, and on the contrary continued to employ him despite protests from the Dutch Government. Read’s expressed view was that Arifin was at first genuinely sympathetic to the Atjehnese cause, and hoped to be appointed their agent in Singapore for further negotiations with Studer or other Consuls. This was the role he liked best, using his knowledge of Europeans and their language to act the ambassador of his people. As Read put it later:

That Mohamed Arifin may have been at first favourable to the Atjehnese, I think highly probable, though had I been in Singapore he would not have dared to be so; as it was I had to exert a certain amount of pressure before I obtained the information I got.\(^{22}\)

The fact that Read was able to exert financial pressure over Arifin because of his substantial debts, whereas Tibang could offer no immediate remuneration, may have been decisive. The impression given by Arifin’s first contacts with Read is that he went to him as much for advice as for a traitor’s reward, and was swept by events, by the force of Read’s personality, and by his chronic financial dependence into the position eventually of becoming a Dutch employee.\(^{23}\) The instances of Read advising Malays in every type of political

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22. Read to Loudon 7 July 1873, copy Kol. to B.Z. 16 September 1873, B.Z. Atjeh.
23. Already at the beginning of March Read admitted having given a total of $85 to Arifin out of Consulate funds to help him with his debts. It may be assumed that Read’s previous advances had been from his own money. Read to Loudon 3 March 1873, copy Kol. to B.Z. 13 May 1873, B.Z. Atjeh.
problem are numerous enough as evidence that Read was not regarded among them as always or primarily a representative of Dutch interests, as his official position implied.

Read sent Arifin to Riau on February 15th to explain matters to the Dutch Resident there. The Resident appeared impressed with Arifin, and persuaded him to undertake a mission to Atjeh not to get an American treaty proposal, as Arifin suggested, but to tell the Sultan and Tibang that he was mistaken in advising an American alliance because he had been unaware of the 1857 treaty of friendship between Atjeh and Netherlands India.24 This mission did not take place, but Arifin did return to see Studer on March 1st, when he claims to have asked whether this 1857 Treaty might be an obstacle to U.S.-Atjeh relations. Studer was still unaware of Arifin's duplicity although he knew the Dutch were preparing for war. He therefore asked Arifin to go to Atjeh urgently to tell Tibang to return quickly with the treaty proposal.25

Arifin did go to Atjeh in March, but only as a guide and interpreter for the unsuccessful Dutch invasion force. Nevertheless he seems to have been able to maintain friendly contacts with the Atjehnese community in Penang. In July he helped them to draw up a draft treaty which they planned to advise the Sultan to negotiate with the Dutch. This scheme was abandoned only when a false newspaper report encouraged the Atjehnese to believe that help from Turkey was on the way.26

Arifin accompanied Read to Batavia in mid-July, to enable the Dutch to make a fuller investigation of the events which led up to the war. The result of these enquiries was to convince the Dutch that Arifin was not to be trusted, and they put pressure on Read thereafter to dismiss him. Read at first evaded this by saying, "I am afraid of his going over to the enemy too soon — so I am keeping him in play and having him watched......I think there is no reason to suspect him of treachery yet."27 But in fact Read obviously found Arifin both useful and reliable for his own purposes. It could be said, indeed, that Read and Arifin were playing a similar independent game, politicking and intriguing with all sides, but that Read played it more successfully so that he was not found out by the Dutch until 1885.

Read therefore continued to employ Arifin until his resignation as Dutch Consul-General in the above year.28 Only once more in that period did Arifin

28. According to some accounts in the files of the Singapore Consulate Arifin was being paid $80 a month during 1875. Arifin had been given $375 in March 1873 to cover his trip to Atjeh with the Dutch fleet, and was being paid first 5 guilders, later 8 guilders a day during his July 1873 visit to Java.
have the opportunity to occupy the centre of the political stage. This was in 1884, when the raja of Teunom, an Atjehnese dependency on the West Coast of Sumatra, was holding ransom the shipwrecked crew of the British steamer *Nisero* in the hope of obtaining advantage both for himself and perhaps for the whole of war-ravaged Atjeh. The Dutch were unable to achieve anything against him militarily, and had therefore agreed to allow a British mission under W.G. Maxwell to go to Teunom to negotiate for the release of the captives. Maxwell and Sir Frederick Weld took Arifin to Penang with them in February 1884, to help them in planning the mission. W.H. Read agreed to thus release his employee so that he might have a source of information on what transpired.

Arifin was delighted at this new opportunity to play an important diplomatic role, and to enjoy again the respect and confidence of leading officials. In a letter he professed his eternal gratitude to Read, “who owns my soul, after God and the Prophet”, for enabling him to move again in such exalted circles.29

He wasted no time in introducing Weld and Maxwell to the leaders of the Atjehnese community in Penang, who acted occasionally as agents for Atjeh’s interests abroad. The Atjehnese and Arifin eagerly planned how they might expand the issue to end the whole war, by going themselves to the capital-in-exile of the Sultanate to prepare a mission by Maxwell which would lead to British mediation between Atjeh and the Netherlands.30

All this was anathema to the Dutch, who strenuously maintained the pretense that they had already conquered Atjeh, and whose sensitivity to British “meddling” in their bungled war was almost pathological. The British Government was sufficiently aware of this to rule that Maxwell’s mission should go only to Teunom, and discuss no wider issues than the release of the *Nisero* crew. Nevertheless both Weld and Maxwell remained keen on the idea of mediation to end the whole war, and after the failure of Maxwell’s mission their views began to receive support in the British Parliament and Government, with interesting results. Weld even claimed naively that Arifin could not have recommended this course unless “his paymasters, the Dutch” had approved of it.31 By thus bringing the Atjehnese Sultanate to the attention of the European Powers again, Arifin can fairly be said to have atoned in small degree for having deluded and betrayed the Atjehnese in 1873.

How should we judge the career of a man engaged in so many grand schemes, so many spectacular failures, so much double dealing—a villainous traitor; a venal time-server; an ambitious patriot; or a fool?

It seems to me that the answer lies in the tragedy of a man cut loose from one society but unable to find a satisfactory place in another, a victim of his own attempt to bridge the unbridgeable. There can be no doubt that Ariffin was highly intelligent, sophisticated, and with a degree of Western culture shared by very few Malays of his time. Abu Bakar of Johor was another such, but he was assured of a place in the sun as heir to the administration of Johor. Ariffin had no place in Malayan society save what he could earn by his wits or a judicious marriage. The Westernised colonial society of the day likewise offered him only a lowly position as the servant of a man such as Read.

Ariffin’s ambitions were to be a great mediator between East and West, a spokesman for the Malays in the corridors of European power. But the encounter between East and West was not to be on his flexible terms, but on those of the Western powers themselves, who demanded to know — "are you for us or against us?"

A weak man he was, and a venal one, with a weakness and venality compounded by his chronic bankruptcy and his dependence on his patrons. But not a villain, nor a hero.

History is often made by such men.