



NEW STRAITS TIMES

DISTRICT OFFICER

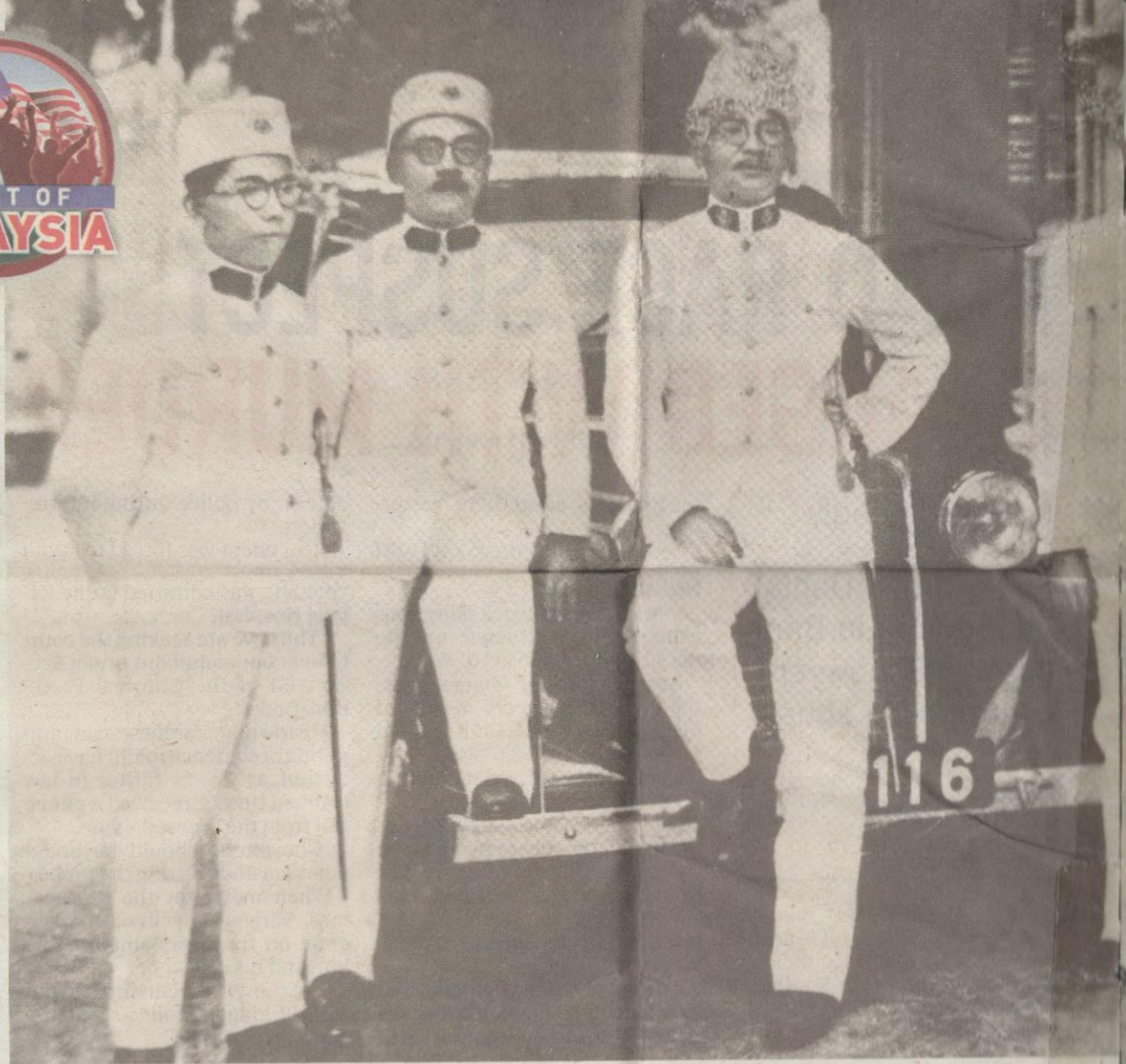
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TUNKU'S LEADERSHIP DEVELOPED IN LANGKAWI

The discovery of a rare document signed by Tunku Abdul Rahman sets **ALAN TEH LEAM SENG** on the path to learn more about the events that brought the Father of Independence to Langkawi

SIGHT of the vaguely familiar-looking signature prompted me to take a Langkawi, an island paradise popular with local and foreign holidaymakers today.



prompted me to a breather from sifting through the huge pile of documents brought in by a supplier just hours earlier.

It took a further few minutes before it crossed my mind that it was possibly the signature of Father of Independence and first prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj.

I traced up to my study and sought out books written by the statesman.

Minutes later, sample signatures in the preface section of books like *Political Awakening*, *Challenging Times* and *Lest We Forget* proved my hunch correct.

Excited beyond words at my unexpected find, I returned to the hoard with hopes of locating more.

After two hours of scrutiny, two other examples surfaced out of the 200 documents, which mostly related to land matters in

Tunku's signature on the three documents came as a surprise as they, like all the rest, should have been signed by the person in charge at the Langkawi Land Office at that time.

Eager to shed light on this conundrum, I hit the books once again and found myself captivated by an enthralling tale of romance, deception, malediction, death and also hope.

Unknown to many, Tunku's fate began to intertwine with that of Langkawi on the day that the ruling Kedah monarch and Tunku's father, Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah, suffered a third stroke in 1912 that prevented him from carrying out his duties.

BRITISH EDUCATION FOR TUNKU

Tunku's eldest brother, Tunku Ibrahim, was appointed regent and, apart from attending to the

affairs of the state, he also took a keen interest in his siblings' education.

Tunku's progress at the Penang Free School caught his eye and a scholarship was created for Tunku to study at the University of Cambridge.

As an undergraduate, Tunku studied Roman, Criminal and Constitutional Law, English Real Property, Conveyancing and Legal History.

His early days in England were spent discussing politics with Malay students and through his initiative, a Malay Society of Great Britain was established with him as honorary secretary.

During his second year in London, Tunku met Violet Coulson, an attractive woman five years his senior, who managed a restaurant frequented by Malay-Asian students.

Despite sharing a close friendship and spending time dancing together whenever Tunku needed a break from his studies, their relationship did not advance beyond platonic and ended when he left for home.

By virtue of studying under a state-sponsored scholarship, Tunku was absorbed, upon his return, into the Kedah civil service in January 1931.

He began his working career as a cadet in the office of the legal adviser before serving as the assistant district officer in Kulim.

It was there that Tunku devoted time to prepare for the Cadet's Law examination to qualify for promotion and passed at his first attempt.

During his time in Kulim, Tunku received a courtesy call from Chong, an old acquaintance from Alor Star, and his daughter.

Chong had been trying to match-make his daughter with Tunku and, with Tunku away from the hustle and bustle of the capital, Chong thought the time was ripe for a proper introduction.

Tunku took an instant liking to the tall and strikingly good-looking Chong Ah Yong, who had a captivating air of self-assurance around her. After converting to Islam, 16-year-old Ah Yong adopted the name Meriam. The local *kadi* solemnised the couple's marriage at Tunku's government quarters.

TIME IN PADANG TERAP

The couple were blessed with two children, Kathijah and Ahmad Nerang, who were born a year apart. During that interval, Tunku was promoted and became the Padang Terap district officer.

The name of his son was inspired by the town where the district office was located, Kuala Nerang, which was notoriously unhealthy as the swamps that bordered it were breeding grounds for mosquitoes that caused malaria.

About a month after the birth of Ahmad Nerang, Meriam contracted a severe bout of malaria. An English female doctor from Alor Star came with a phial of quinine and a hypodermic syringe.

Her terrible mistake of inject-

ing pure quinine into Meriam's vein, after thinking that the medicine had been pre-diluted and was ready for use, caused Tunku's wife her life.

Acknowledging the sad episode as a tragic misadventure, Tunku made no attempts to lodge an official report.

Instead, he honoured his wife's memory by obtaining funds to drain the swamps and brought the menace to a significant decline.

News of Meriam's death eventually reached Coulson through Malay students who patronised her London restaurant.

She promptly handed over the restaurant management to capable employees, took the next available boat for Singapore and only wrote to Tunku upon arrival.

Although he had never harboured any intention of marrying Coulson when they parted ways in London, Meriam's death had left a painful vacuum in his life.

The thought of Coulson's good intention of making the trip to be by his side, at his darkest hour, made Tunku take the train down to meet her.

In Singapore, they rekindled memories of their long friendship and danced at the Raffles Hotel.

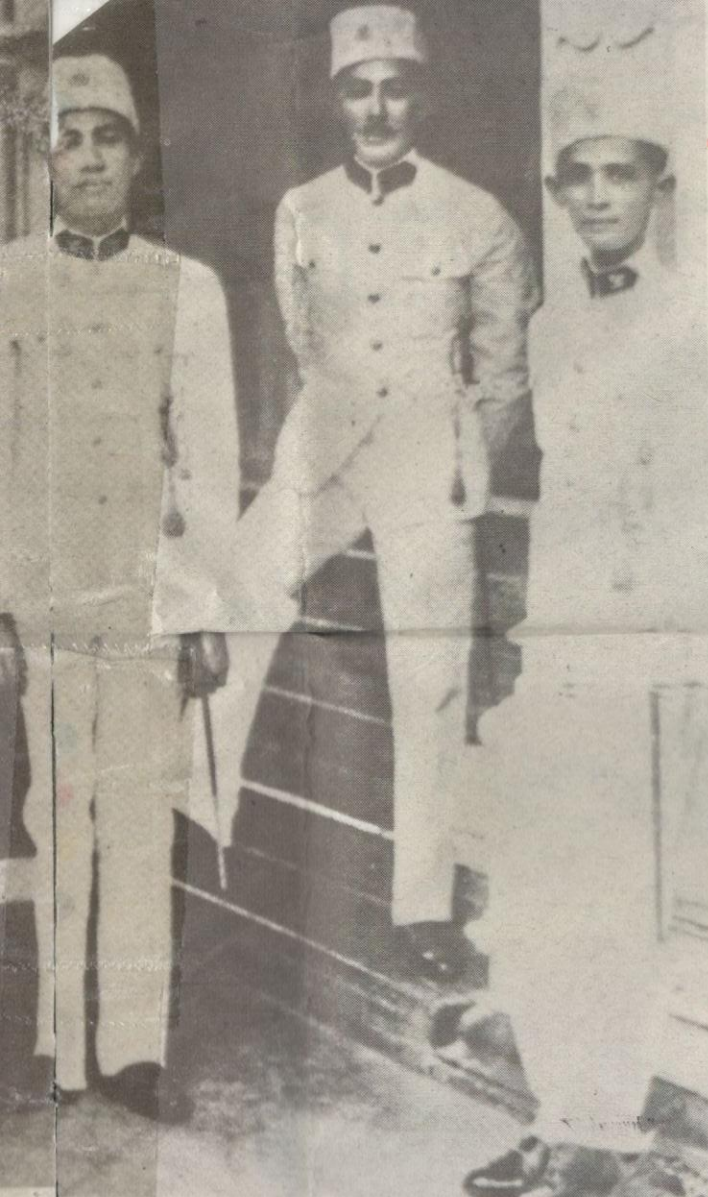
Then, Tunku took Coulson to the *kadi* at the Sultan Mosque in Arab Street where the couple were married according to Muslim rites and tradition.

LAW AGAINST MIXED MARRIAGES

Aware of a Kedah law that for-



Mahsuri's tomb after it was rebuilt through Tunku Abdul Rahman's initiative



Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj (third from left) with Kedah civil service colleagues in Alor Star. PIX COURTESY OF ALAN TEH LEAM SENG

hamad Sheriff Osman shared the views of the late Tunku Ibrahim regarding foreign brides and showed his displeasure by transferring Tunku to isolated Langkawi to serve as district officer.

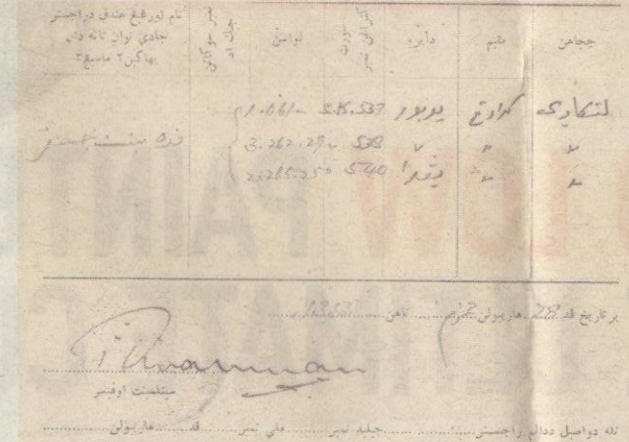
My heart skipped a beat after learning this piece of information. Everything was coming together now. The Langkawi Land Office must have been at the same building or at the very least near to the district officer's workplace and Tunku must have taken upon himself to sign the documents on the rare days that the land officer was unavailable to execute his duties.

With the mystery solved, I continue devouring the pages, eager to find out more about the life Tunku and his British bride led in the place where many in the civil service considered to be the backwaters of the state.

LIFE IN LANGKAWI

At that time, Langkawi district was thinly populated, scarcely cultivated and the object of a legendary curse whose term of seven generations was, in the opinion of locals as well as outsiders, yet to expire.

Despite that, Langkawi presented a few inherent advantages for the couple who made their home in Kuah, close to the dis-



Tunku Abdul Rahman's signature on a 1936 Langkawi land document.

coastal motorboats that called daily from Penang and Kuala Kedah, while roads were non-existent, apart from a sandy path that led from the government sanatorium to Kuah and a 7km earth road from town to the Sungei Raya Estate, a British-owned rubber plantation.

To make matters worse, Mohamad Sheriff made sure that Tunku's requests for development funds were pushed to the bottom of the pile, never to surface.

Left to his own devices, the resourceful Tunku refused to take things lying down. Calling on his leadership qualities, Tunku rallied the Langkawi people of all races and inspired them to join him in the construction of a new jetty and bridge, paths running

were most instrumental in the rebuilding of the tomb began to change for the better.

The contractor who built the tomb for free won a huge contract on mainland Kedah and went on to become one of the richest and most successful businessmen in Alor Star.

On the other hand, good luck came to Tunku in a different manner. The Acting British Adviser of Kedah at that time, S.W. Jones, paid Langkawi a visit and was so taken by the progress and initiatives shown by Tunku that he persuaded the State Council, much to the chagrin of Mohamad Sheriff, to make Tunku the Sungei Petani district officer.

It was definitely a huge promotion as Sungei Petani was the second most important district

bade royal family members from marrying non-Malays without the prior approval of the sultan or regent on pain of disinheritance, Tunku made arrangements for Coulson to put up in Penang with the promise of visiting whenever his work schedule permitted.

Things started working in Tunku's favour when Tunku Ibrahim, known for his strong views against mixed marriages,

passed away in 1934. The new regent and Sultan Abdul Hamid's younger brother, Tunku Mahmud, who took a more open approach to the matter, consented to the union.

Although the move gave Coulson the greenlight to move into the Kuala Nerang government quarters with Tunku, the matter was far from settled.

Kedah state secretary Mo-

home in Kuah, close to the district office. It was by far more quiet, picturesque and definitely much healthier to live in than Kuala Nerang. Despite the British habit of always looking on the bright side of things even in dire situations, the list advocating Langkawi's strengths was a very short one.

Life in Langkawi was challenging to say the least. There was no proper jetty to service the small

jetty and bridle paths running through most parts of the island.

Those were the very qualities that would, in the watershed years of our country, stand Tunku in good stead as he lead Malaysians towards self-rule in 1957.

LEGEND OF MAHSURI

During his time spent with locals, Tunku received first-hand accounts of old legends that haunted Langkawi and pieced together a tragic story of the beautiful maiden Mahsuri, who was said to have been unjustly sentenced to a most excruciating death.

Captivated by the curse Mahsuri placed on Langkawi before she died, Tunku initiated an island wide search for her final resting place and was deeply saddened when it was found in a very neglected state.

Tunku planned for the construction of a modest tomb with white marble covering and an inscribed headstone and was deeply touched when Hainanese contractor Phor Sing Teong, who was commissioned to do the work, refused even a cent in payment, saying that he willingly and proudly did it to honour Mahsuri's memory.

As soon as the tomb was completed, Tunku publicly declared that the period of Mahsuri's curse had expired and it was time for Langkawi to embrace progress and catch up with other Kedah districts.

Then, as if Mahsuri herself had agreed with the declaration, the fortunes of the two people who

most important district in Kedah after Kota Star.

In the later years, some people even went as far as to say that all the good deeds that Tunku did for Langkawi were repaid in the form of strength and wisdom to surmount challenges that stood in his way while leading Malaya towards nationhood.

After Merdeka, Tunku, in his capacity as prime minister, continued to devote time and energy to the development of Langkawi. Millions of ringgit were spent to provide roads, water supply systems and other modern conveniences to the people.

Country clubs, golf courses and hotels were built to entice tourists to visit and enjoy the captivating wonders of the island.

While placing the remaining documents into proper storage boxes, I took time to reflect on the great strides of progress made in Langkawi during recent times.

Langkawi has gone from strength to strength over the recent four decades and this was all thanks to farsighted vision of another brilliant son of Kedah, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In return, the Langkawi people have shown great leadership themselves by voting in Dr Mahathir as their member of parliament during the last general election and, together with the rest of Malaysia, brought about a change in this nation that will be felt for generations to come.

As of now, the sky is the limit for Langkawi and its future is as bright as it can ever be.



Tunku Abdul Rahman organised a play about Mahsuri in Kulim