

Unleashing the Malay maritime legacy through history, hikayat and heritage

By **Ninot Aziz** - February 5, 2024 @ 12:38pm



The archaeological discovery at Sungai Batu proves Kedah's position as an important centre for iron smelting and a major port, supplying qalai iron for weapon production over 2,000 years ago. NSTP FILE PIC

How does an ethnologist or archaeologist study the civilisation of a people? Careful research is needed on the way of life, history, origins, ancient literature, as well as the study of ancient tools, architecture and artefacts.

In the same way, ancient hikayat and legends can serve as one of the keys to understanding the past, providing insights into the daily life of the Malay world hundreds of years ago.

Here's a little of the Hikayat Awang Sulong Merah Muda:

"hai enche' jurubatu... bolehkah hamba menumpang naik ka-geliong panjang ini? Apakah nama enche jurubatu dan siapakah yang menjadi jurumudi-nya. Apakah gerangan nama enche' nakhoda geliong panjang ini?"

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The Malay Archipelago, especially Semenanjung Tanah Melayu, was a world destination since the time Claudius Ptolemy depicted Chersonesus Aurea on his map *Geographica* circa 2 AD.

Today, archaeological discovery at Sungai Batu proves Kedah's position as an important centre for iron smelting and a major port, supplying qalai iron for weapon production over 2,000 years ago.

Equipped with skills in navigation, trade, industrial and maritime knowledge, civilisations like Champa, Srivijaya, Majapahit, Langkasuka and Kedah pioneered the formation of ancient maritime kingdoms in the region long before Pasai, Melaka, Patani and Aceh.

The Straits of Melaka, the busiest natural strait in the world, became the hub of trade for commodities such as spices, silk, ceramics and gold. Therefore, it only makes sense that maritime trade is intrinsic to our life and culture.

As a people whose culture is intertwined with the ocean undoubtedly uses a language rich with maritime terms. This is interpreted in the Malay arts, culture and literature. Beautiful Malay carvings adorn Malay boats and ships, showcasing skilled expertise in wood and ironwork.

In our language, we find tools and adornments such as bangau, okok, and caping, as well as essential items for long voyages such as teropong emas (golden telescopes) and peti besi (iron chests or boxes).

From the hikayat, ships such as Bunga Rampai, Layangan Angin, Mendam Berahi and Cakra Dunia from Aceh appear in the tales of Malay maritime voyages. Skilled sailors ventured to distant lands like China, Egypt, Mecca and Istanbul.

The legends of Laksamana Hang Tuah, Hang Nadim and Sang Nila Utama are etched in the *Sulalatus Salatin*. The story of Hang Tuah is recognised by Unesco and Admiral Keumalahayati from Aceh is acknowledged by Unesco as the world's first female admiral.

Beyond hikayat, the pantun, gurindam and syair as well as cultural arts like Makyung, are evidence to a way of life closely connected to the sea. For example, there is the classic pantun:

"Pisang emas dibawa belayar, Masak sebiji di atas peti, Utang emas boleh dibayar, Utang budi dibawa mati", or:

"Asam di darat ikan di laut, dalam belanga bertemu juga", or "Kalau takut dilambung ombak, Jangan berumah di tepi pantai."

When we pay attention to the language, we see the unmistakable narratives and vocabulary that serve as a "time capsule" from the past.

For example, in the legend of Hikayat Awang Sulung Merah Muda, many activities of the Malay world are depicted in detail, such as a prince's rite of passage, the opening of lands and yes, life at sea.

When Awang Sulung's cousin, Puteri Dayang Nuramah, was preparing to embark on a sea voyage, she was to be accompanied by young ladies only, from captain to deck hands.

"Himpunkanlah anak-anak dara datang mengadap ke istana."

"Lalu bertitah Datok Batin Alam kepada Bujang Selamat, Pergilah kau panggil mualim, jurubatu, jurumudi sekeliannya suruh siapkan kakap Bunga Rampai Layangan Angin itu serta alat senjata alat peperangan."

"Tinggal sekalian anak dara; ada yang menjadi mualim, jurumudi, jurubatu masing masing dengan jawatannya. Maka kakap pun belayar."

Far out at sea, the princess spotted the geliong belonging to Princess Jawa Puteri Dayang Seri Jawa. Both ships raised their yellow flags, and Puteri Dayang Nuramah boarded the geliong. She was welcomed with betel leaves and exchanged pantun - a display of courtesy among noble princesses.

This is the story of two brave princesses of the Malay world who ventured out to sea, not forgetting their adat, adapt at using firearms and cannons.

And from the Syair Siti Zubaidah, here is Sultan Zainal Abidin who captained his ship Fathu'l-Zaman, a magnificent ship equipped with weaponry and cannons. A ship that had to withstand storm and gale at sea.

"Kapal pun sudah lalu diturunkan, Tali menali sekalian dikenakan, Kamar beranda sekalian dihiaskan, Tunggul bendera Sudan dinaikkan.

"Turunlah ribut bukan kepalang, Langit pun hitam sepeti arang, Seperti bukit rupa gelombang, Tubuh kapal sepertikan hilang."

Before we conclude on the Malay Maritime legacy, let us first examine the abilities of the Malay people inherent to ship-building. We know that the Orang Melayu were excellent builders, constructing palaces, mosques, halls, as well as boats and river house-boats - woodwork was their ingrained talent and their expertise in all flora and fauna of the tropical jungle was legendary.

Most ancient ships used cengal wood, which was widely available in the Malay Archipelago, especially in the peninsula. In addition to wood, gelam bark, bamboo, and nipah leaves were also used for various boat functions. Gelam bark is especially used as water insulation for the inside of the boat.

There are many more secrets of Malay navigational knowledge, from reading the stars, to the different colours of waves at sea, observing clouds and storms, as well as the monsoon season and wind changes.

The important thing is that this knowledge has been passed down through generations in the Malay World.

If we look at Hikayat Pahang, Hikayat Johor, Misa Melayu, Hikayat Hang Tuah, and many more literary stories from the Malay world, we will find many references to the maritime culture.

The story of Enrique of Melaka or Panglima Awang takes the theory of the first person to circumnavigate the world further and has been studied by scholars from Portugal and the Philippines.

The Enrique de Malacca Memorial Project exhibition by Ahmad Fuad Osman in the United Arab Emirates was sponsored by the Sharjah Art Foundation. The navigator's life story as a translator and loyal companion to Ferdinand Magellan, as well as his return to the Malay Archipelago, has become a legend told in Malaysia, the Philippines, Sumatra and many academic discussions.

Therefore, when the Hukum Kanun or the laws of the Malay world have specific chapters for maritime legislation, it clearly shows the importance of the maritime world to the Malays. The Kitab Kanun reflects the significance of life connected to and dependent on the sea, to the extent that specific laws were necessary, in addition to Hukum Kanun Melaka.

In 2014, at the International Exhibition of National Library, Malaysia, I learned that the oldest manuscript of the undang Undang Melaka is still preserved at the Vatican City Library.

According to Dr Liaw Yock Fang, the manuscript stored there is the Vatican Ind. IV Malakaans Wetboek van Zeerecht (Maritime Law). He further states that this manuscript, preserved in Vatican City since the early 17th century, is the "best manuscript of the Malacca laws" (Liaw 1976).

The question remains, why is this manuscript of Malay Maritime Law preserved in the Vatican City Library?

The Malay expertise in maritime affairs not only helped develop the Malay World, but also strengthened trading power and the exchange of knowledge and culture with other civilisations. Through our maritime knowledge we would be able to establish the influence of our nation as an important world civilisation.

Through our traditional narratives, we can peek into the wealth of Malay thoughts and the dignified identity that existed centuries ago.

Hopefully, this can instill a sense of pride in our people to recognise the maritime heritage of the Malays.

